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Abstract

This article presents a case study exploring the development of two up-zoning policies recently introduced in New Zealand: the *'National Policy Statement on Urban Development'* 2020 which requires local authorities in major urban areas to raise building height limits within walkable catchments of urban centres and along rapid transit corridors; and the *'Medium Density Residential Standards'* 2021 which require these local authorities to allow three homes of up to three storeys on any section by right. These two policies are exceptional as they are a rare example of a central government directing zoning interventions at the national scale, and they were both initially introduced with bi-partisan support. Applying the lens of policy mobilities, I examine the process through which 'up-zoning', as a globally mobile policy, was successfully localised in New Zealand, by tracing the evolution and circulation of a broader policy idea – 'relaxing land use regulations' – from its initial emergence circa 2008, through the years leading up to these recent up-zoning policies. Drawing from interviews with various policy actors – including politicians, civil servants, urban activists, economists, and journalists – I develop insights on what it is about the local socio-political context that enabled 'up-zoning' to take hold in New Zealand when it has struggled elsewhere.

I pay respect to mana whenua as the enduring custodians of the land of which I write. I recognise that Māori sovereignty was never ceded and honour with gratitude their sacred spiritual connection and stewardship over Aotearoa, the land we now call New Zealand.

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Introduction

‘Up-zoning’ is an urban planning policy phenomena that has been sweeping the globe in recent years – or sweeping the Anglosphere, at least. Usually motivated by housing affordability concerns in high-demand cities, up-zoning proponents advocate for the relaxation of restrictive land-use regulations (LURs) – like building height limits – to enable higher density development and induce market-led housing supply. However, in many countries and at various levels of governance, attempts to introduce such policies have proven to be politically fraught – often met with strong NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) backlash from existing residents.

New Zealand – a country with relatively low density cities and one of the most unaffordable housing markets in the world (Burn-Murdoch, 2023; Cox, 2023)¹ – has been at the forefront of this up-zoning movement, recently introducing two policies that have been met with international acclaim (West & Garlick, 2023): the ‘*National Policy Statement on Urban Development*’ 2020 (NPS-UD) requires local authorities in major urban areas to raise building height limits within walkable catchments of urban centres and along rapid transit corridors (and abolish minimum car parking requirements); and the ‘*Medium Density Residential Standards*’ 2021² (MDRS) require these local authorities to allow three homes of up to three storeys on any section by right.

These two policies are exceptional for two reasons. First, they are a rare example of a central government directing zoning interventions at the national scale, overriding local planning control and circumventing NIMBYism. Second, despite the politically unpalatable nature of such policies, both were initially introduced by the centre-left Labour-government with bi-partisan support from the centre-right National Party. Although political pressures have since seen the National Party withdraw support for the broadly applying MDRS, both parties remain committed to the more targeted NPS-UD, and indeed to the general premise of relaxing LURs (West & Garlick, 2023). The unusual nature of this New Zealand case warrants closer attention. In this article, I draw from interviews with politicians, civil servants, activists, and other actors to explore the historical development of these two policies.

Up-zoning as a policy position is often associated with the growing, global YIMBY (yes-in-my-backyard) movement, thought to have originated in San Francisco in the early 2010s in response to a mounting housing affordability crisis, driven by growing demand and insufficient supply of new homes (Dougherty, 2021; McCormick, 2017). However, as I demonstrate, New Zealand has its own history with up-zoning – and with the broader policy idea of ‘relaxing LURs’ (see: Fischel, 2015; Glaeser et

¹ House prices rose by 256% between 2000 and 2021 (inflation-adjusted), compared to 110% in Britain and 64% in America (The Economist, 2022).

² Passed under the Resource Management (Enabling Housing Supply and Other Matters) Amendment Act 2021

al., 2005) – that stretches back at least as far. I trace the evolution of this policy idea from its emergence in New Zealand circa 2008, over a series of experimental, small-scale test-cases under the National-government (2008-2017), through to the NPS-UD and the MDRS introduced under the Labour-government (2017-2023). Applying the lens of policy mobilities, I develop understandings of the processes through which globally mobile policies (like up-zoning) are localised, offering insights on what it is about the local context in New Zealand that enabled up-zoning to take hold here when it has struggled elsewhere.

The localisation of globally mobile policies

Globalisation and the ‘evidence-based’ turn in policy-making have led policy-makers to increasingly scan for ‘ideas from elsewhere’ to apply locally – a phenomenon geographers have termed ‘policy mobilities’ (Baker & Temenos, 2015; McCann, 2011; McCann, 2008; Temenos & McCann, 2013). At its simplest, policy mobilities research seeks to understand how and why policies move around and change, to better understand how policy-making gets done (Temenos & McCann, 2013), with the ‘object of analysis’ being both ‘the policy and those involved in its production, circulation, and embedding’ (McCann & Ward, 2012, p.47). Policy-making is conceptualised as ‘both a local and, simultaneously, a global socio-spatial and political process’, and policies as ‘assemblage[s] of locally and globally sourced components, discourses, practices, materials and actors’ (Thompson, 2020, p. 85; see also: Baker & Temenos, 2015; McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Temenos et al., 2019).

Policy mobilities research has tended to focus on the international flows of ‘apparently global phenomena – globalised policies’ between places, rather than how these policies ‘find their expression and are given their meaning in particular, grounded, localised ways’ (Cochrane & Ward, 2012, p.7). However, attention has been shifting towards the localisation of these globally mobile policies (Temenos & Baker, 2015), with researchers asking ‘not only how policy is ‘made up’ on the ground by drawing on circulating models[/ideas], but also how the local political ground is prepared for new policy in and through the learning, adoption, moulding, and implementation of a local version of a globally mobile policy.’ (Temenos & McCann, 2012, p.1394). With this article, I contribute to this shift in attention, responding to calls for greater attention to local politics of policy mobilities (Temenos & McCann, 2012, 2013), the local geographical contexts through which ‘policy and space are mutually constituted’ (Temenos et al., 2019, p.107, Harris & Moore, 2013), the oft ‘black-boxed’ processes of policy learning (McFarlane, 2011; Temenos & McCann, 2012), and the processes of ‘argumentation’ by which proponents – once convinced by a globally circulated policy idea – then persuade other local actors (Kennedy, 2016).

Several researchers have already analysed the initial emergence and localisation of the ‘relaxing LURs’ idea in New Zealand. Murphy (2014) provides insight on the ‘point of departure’ (Temenos & Ward, 2018): he contends that this idea was transferred into New Zealand in the mid-2000s via reports authored by a US-based consultancy ‘*Demographia*’ (promoting the Houston ‘no zoning’ model), disseminated by figures within the centre-right, pro-market National Party. Murphy (2014, 2016), Gurran et al. (2014), and White & Nandedkar (2021) then trace forward, documenting the subsequent ‘problematizing’ of the planning system as ‘inefficient’ and ‘unresponsive’ in the early years following the National Party’s election to government in 2008. I extend this body of work, tracing back from the most recent ‘point of arrival’ (Temenos & Ward, 2018): the recent up-zoning policies. In exploring the history of these up-zoning policies and the evolution of the broader idea, ‘relaxing LURs’, I retread some of the same ground as these authors. However, where they relied on published documentation, I take an actor-centric approach, drawing on interviews as my primary source to centre the accounts of the people involved. Thus, I engage with the multiplicities of policy mobilities (McCann, 2008), acknowledging the impossibility of capturing a singular ‘incontestable truth’ (Peck & Theodore, 2012); the account I present with this article merely serves to ‘thicken’ our understandings.

By focusing on the local actors I contribute to the ‘peopling’ of policy mobilities research (Temenos & Baker, 2015), emphasising the central roles played by individuals – particularly ‘charismatic individuals’ (Jacobs & Lees, 2013; Lerner & Laurie, 2010) – in the presently understudied more informal and ad hoc processes of policy mobilities (Borén & Young, 2021). I respond to calls to broaden the scope of actors considered (Borén & Young, 2021; Temenos et al., 2019) by including the perspectives of ‘outsiders’ (Peck & Theodore, 2012) – particularly urban activists. As Thompson (2020) notes, scant attention has been paid to the role of urban social movements in mobilising policy ideas, ‘as if travelling ideas within policy circles and those circulated by activists operate according to two entirely different logics’ (p.85). Following Thompson, I demonstrate the entanglement and interdependency of these two circuits, by examining the development of an ‘advocacy coalition’ (Sabatier, 1988) in favour of ‘relaxing LURs’. Further, in charting the rise of urban economists as ‘experts’ in planning debates, I extend the growing literature on the production, legitimacy, and politics of urban expertise (Häikiö, 2007; Harris, 2023; Kuus, 2021; McCann, 2008; Robin & Acuto, 2023).

Finally, I seek to enrich debates on questions of *scale* in policy mobilities (Temenos & Baker, 2015). To date, much of the policy mobilities research has focused on horizontal flows between cities, regions, and countries, as opposed to the vertical, cross-scale flows between levels of governance. With this empirical case, I illustrate the messy movement of the ‘relaxing LURs’ idea between local authorities and central government since its emergence in New Zealand. I show how four experimental, small-scale test-cases preceding the two recent up-zoning policies – particularly the development of Auckland city’s Unitary Plan – constituted an important local learning process, during which this idea evolved from an

initial focus on enabling growth ‘out’ towards a focus on ‘up’, through a combination of top-down and bottom-up pressures. I suggest that, in addition to the globally-sourced components, the locally-sourced components derived from these small-scale test-cases were crucial to the construction of New Zealand’s national-scale up-zoning policies.

Methodology

This article draws from twenty-eight in-depth interviews (R=23-81 min; M=60 min) conducted between September 2023 and March 2024 with a diverse range of policy actors (table 1), and from my own experiences as an affordable housing activist³ and onetime policy advisor at the Ministry for Housing and Urban Development (MHUD)⁴. Following Peck and Theodore (2012), I aimed to capture a broad range of insider *and* outsider perspectives: sampling participants first within my personal networks – based on my own insider knowledge of individuals’ roles in the ‘local ‘policy ecology’ responsible for shaping and influencing (directly and indirectly) policy-making’ (Borén & Young, 2021, p.556) – then via snowballing as I ‘studied through’ (McCann & Ward, 2012) and ‘followed the policy’ (Peck & Theodore, 2012).

Table 1: summary of participants⁵.

Central government politicians (N=6)	Members of Parliament for the Labour (centre-left), National (centre-right), and Green (left) parties, including present and former ministers.
Civil servants (N=13)	Employed in policy roles at a range of seniorities (from advisor to manager/director level) at the Ministry for Housing and Urban Development (MHUD), the Ministry for the Environment (MFE), the Treasury, the Productivity Commission, and the Infrastructure Commission. Sample includes several former private consultants, several trained economists and planners, and several former employees of Auckland Council.
Economists (N=2)	One academic, one private think-tank. Both frequently provide public commentary, at times advising politicians/government agencies in (in)formal capacities.
Journalists (N=3)	Selected on the basis of extensive coverage of housing and planning policy.
Activists (N=4)	One former member of ‘ <i>Generation Zero</i> ’, one present member of the ‘ <i>Coalition</i>

³ I coordinated campaigns advocating for urban intensification between 2020 and 2022, as a member of Generation Zero.

⁴ While I did not work directly on the development or implementation of either of the two ‘up-zoning’ policies, many of my former colleagues did and these policies were of on-going relevance to my work.

⁵ Due to the contentious and political nature of these policies, many individuals agreed to participate on the condition of confidentiality.

for More Homes’, the editor of urbanism blog ‘*Greater Auckland*’, and the user behind an influential pseudonymous Twitter account. Sample includes a practising planner.

Interviews followed a narrative format (Riessman, 2008), whereby participants were initially asked to tell the story of how these policies ‘came to be’ from their own perspective, allowing me to capture rich, genealogical accounts (Huxley, 2013; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Thompson, 2020). As my research design traces back from where the policy idea ‘has arrived’ (McCann & Ward, 2012; Temenos & Ward, 2018), most participants were selected for their high degree of involvement with the two up-zoning policies in question. Consequently, interviews tended to focus on more recent events (dependent on the participant’s tenure in the policy space).

In an effort to mitigate the subject-bias associated with interviewing (Temenos & Ward, 2018), I additionally draw from official documentation of the policy process (including briefings, Cabinet papers, and reports released under the Official Information Act), transcripts of parliamentary debates, other ancillary texts, media articles, and various websites, to triangulate and corroborate findings. That said, I am myself something of an ‘inside dopester’ (Peck & Theodore, 2012). As such, per the wisdom of Peck & Theodore, I present the account that follows as *a* truth – or, an ‘explanatory prototype’ – rather than *the* truth.

Experimentation, lesson learning, and idea evolution

The idea of relaxing LURs emerged in New Zealand circa 2008. Murphy (2014) contends that this idea was transferred into New Zealand via reports by ‘*Demographia*’, disseminated by figures within the National Party. However, my interviewees report another origin. While most could not recall when or how this idea first emerged, several referred to a seminal paper by New Zealand academics which found strong impacts of Auckland city’s urban growth boundary on land (and therefore house) prices (Grimes & Liang, 2007, 2009), surprising many and sparking new interest in LURs and urban economics – with a particular focus on enabling growth ‘out’ (rather than ‘up’).

Regardless of the precise (extra-)local origin, the emergence of this idea coincided with the Global Financial Crisis and the election of a National-led government, instigating a shift in the focus of housing affordability policy within the central government from demand-side to supply-side interventions. Over their nine-year term (2008-2017), the National-government proceeded to ‘problematise’ the planning system as inefficient and unresponsive (Gurran et al., 2014; Murphy, 2014, 2016; White & Nandedkar, 2021), experimenting with relaxing LURs over a series of four small-scale test-cases that interviewees identified as important sources for the later up-zoning policies.

First, the rebuild of Christchurch city following a major earthquake in 2011. In response to the sudden, significant loss of housing stock, central government forced local authorities in the area to immediately re-zone significant amounts of rural land for housing, successfully inducing new supply and ameliorating prices (see: Mamula-Seadon, 2017; Sense Partners, 2021; West & Garlick, 2023): ‘out’-zoning.

Second, the Auckland Unitary Plan (AUP). In 2010, central government forcibly amalgamated eight local authorities in New Zealand’s largest metropolitan area – home to a third of New Zealanders – to form Auckland Council (Asquith et al., 2021). This new council was then required to draft a Unitary Plan: a multi-step process eventually completed in 2016 that saw approximately 75% of the city’s land area up-zoned (Greenaway-McGrevy & Phillips, 2023; see also: Blakeley, 2015; Donnell, 2022; Imran & Pearce, 2015; McArthur, 2017; Murphy, 2016). The AUP has since become an internationally famous case study, considered to be the first test of broad up-zoning globally (UCLA Housing Voice, 2023; West & Garlick, 2023), successfully demonstrating positive outcomes for housing affordability (Greenaway-McGrevy & So, 2024). Indeed, everyone I interviewed referred to the AUP as the most significant source case for the later up-zoning policies.

However, housing affordability was not the initial motivation for this up-zoning. Rather, the new council aspired to improve livability and connectivity, reduce transport emissions, and raise productivity, and was inspired by international examples to adopt a ‘compact city’ model that would concentrate growth ‘up’ in existing urban areas while restricting growth ‘out’ at the city fringe. The council’s inaugural chief economist, Geoff Cooper, explained that this strategic-level decision was made at the outset, in isolation of the planning team and with little (or no) consideration for the impacts on land prices – despite growing concerns about housing affordability in the region (interview).

Over the six year period in which the AUP was developed, the council’s commitment to this ‘compact city’ model proved unshakeable, becoming a major source of friction with the National-government, which repeatedly pressured (and threatened) the council to enable growth ‘out’ to reduce land prices and improve housing affordability, per the findings of Grimes and Liang (2007, 2009). Meanwhile, the council’s ambitions to ‘up’-zone were met with local NIMBY-backlash, which caused several councillors to develop cold feet and attempt to water down the draft AUP. It was only through the intervention of a central government-appointed Independent Hearings Panel – installed in response to the council’s request for a one-off, ‘streamlined’ plan-making process – that much of the originally proposed up-zoning was retained (Auckland Council, 2011; Blakeley, 2015; New Zealand Government, 2012). However, councillors were ultimately able to maintain the existing ‘special character’ zoning in many older, inner-city suburbs – leaving what one interviewee described as “*a ring of shame*” of low-density, high socio-economic suburbs (in which new construction was tightly restricted) around the

central business district – while directing the most of the newly zoned housing capacity further afield, into lower socio-economic suburbs (Cheung et al., 2023; Donnell, 2022).

The third source case was the Special Housing Areas initiative, launched by central government in 2013. Under this initiative local authorities around the country could, in agreement with central government, designate areas where developers could bypass some LURs to build at higher densities (‘up’) and/or access greenfield land ahead of planned rezonings (‘out’) (McArthur, 2017; McLeay, 2020; Murphy, 2016). Ultimately, these Special Housing Areas had limited impact, due to their small scale and local authorities’ reluctance to implement them (Fernandez et al., 2021; McRae, 2018; West & Garlick, 2023).

The fourth source case was the National Policy Statement on Urban Development Capacity 2016 (NPS-UDC), the predecessor of the first up-zoning policy (the NPS-UD). Over the course of the AUP development, the escalating housing affordability crisis gradually shifted from being understood as an Auckland-specific problem, to a nation-wide issue that warranted national direction from central government. Inspired by the capacity assessment methodology developed for the AUP – which considered *commercial feasibility*, an important new innovation resulting in a much more enabling Plan – the NPS-UDC required all local authorities in high-growth areas to periodically conduct such capacity assessments, and monitor (among other things) house prices and rents. The intent was that, if councils were required to transparently consider this information during plan-making, they would relax LURs accordingly and enable more development. However, several interviewees criticised the NPS-UDC as toothless and ineffective. One civil servant described it as *“an information discovery mechanism that didn't really have a clear path to [...] compel changes in practice.”*

Over this period of experimentation and learning (Jacobs & Lees, 2013; McFarlane, 2011; Temenos & McCann, 2012), the idea of relaxing LURs evolved within central government from the initial focus on ‘out’ to encapsulate ‘up’ as well, as it became increasingly clear that *both* could work as housing affordability interventions. But another important lesson was learned, too: simply encouraging local authorities to implement such interventions did *not* work. As one former minister explained, a view developed that:

“local government, left to its own devices, would never introduce this kind of reform. Because councils are so exposed to the political pressures of their ratepayers [...] we saw that when Auckland Council, in the development of its first Unitary Plan [...] faced a basically a NIMBY revolt [...] the poor councillors and local board members ran for the hills. And that was, I think, a pretty vivid illustration of how that kind of NIMBY-power is expressed in local government. That makes it very, very hard for these reforms to be made at the local level.”

Idea circulation and coalition building

The evolution of the policy idea over this early period of experimentation and learning was facilitated by a parallel and mutually-reinforcing process of circulation, during which this idea was adopted and spread by urban economists and activists, eventually accruing a coalition in support.

According to several interviewees, the seminal paper on Auckland's urban growth boundary by Grimes and Liang (2007, 2009) instigated a community of interest in urban economics and land markets in New Zealand, where one did not exist previously. In the decade preceding the up-zoning policies, this community – including academics, consultants, civil servants, and amateurs – played a significant role in circulating the idea of relaxing LURs.

While at first this community was fragmented, many interviewees referred to lecture tours by economist Edward Glaeser and urban planner Alain Bertaud – two internationally renowned proponents of relaxing LURs – in 2013 and 2014 respectively, as key events that connected, inspired, and grew this community. As the inaugural Auckland Council chief economist, Geoff Cooper, recalls, prior to Glaeser's visit he had been inspired by Grimes and Liang (2007, 2009) to investigate the costs and benefits of LURs to inform the development of the AUP, but had felt stranded and alone:

"I distinctly remember that the more I found, the more I realised that this was like opening Pandora's Box [and] to my surprise, it seemed to be such a nascent area. Like, I didn't feel like I had any other urban economist that I could go to [...]. We brought in Ed Glaeser to come and talk to the Council [and it was] instrumental for me personally, because I was able to talk to a guy with far more experience on all of these policies [which] very much got me into the world of trying to understand land markets."

Indeed, many interviewees recall these lectures as revelatory, having a lasting influence on the direction of urban development policy in New Zealand. Endorsement by these international 'experts' – these members of the 'global intelligence corp' (Rapoport, 2015) – contributed to legitimising the idea as 'best practice' (Temenos et al., 2019, p. 20; Temenos & McCann, 2013). These tours were widely attended, attracting hundreds of listeners and acting as important 'convergence spaces' (Temenos, 2016) that facilitated the spread of this idea.

Several interviewees also referred to the role of a private email group – particularly active during the development of the AUP – in fostering this urban economics community, with select membership comprised of *"some very senior and very well known experts and public thought leaders"* (interview, civil servant), including Hugh Paveltich, a New Zealand-based co-author of the Demographia reports examined by Murphy (2014). This email group provided an important platform for debate on the economics of land markets, developing the evidential basis for relaxing LURs (with a focus on 'out').

Although the majority of the group's members held right-wing and/or libertarian affiliations, active efforts were made to collaborate across partisan lines. A few interviewees, including politicians and civil servants, described being 'brought in' to this group at various times, which suggests proactive efforts to circulate the idea.

This emerging community gradually built a New Zealand-specific evidence base for the economic case for relaxing LURs, and started shifting attention towards 'up' in addition to 'out'. However many interviewees felt it was the Productivity Commission that mainstreamed this case. Drawing on the urban economics community, the Commission published three major reports on housing affordability between 2012 and 2017 (Productivity Commission, 2012, 2015, 2017) which built an "*evidential consensus*" (interview, civil servant). These reports consistently identified overly-restrictive LURs as a significant driver of house price appreciation, and recommended enabling both urban intensification ('up') and expansion ('out'). Further, they confronted the political pressures exerted on local authorities by existing homeowners, and asserted that housing supply was an issue of national significance which central government had a legitimate interest in resolving.

These reports achieved substantial media coverage, penetrating deep into the public discourse. In a way, they acted as 'boundary objects' (Warwick, 2015), communicating the idea of relaxing LURs widely. As an independent (albeit government-funded) think tank, the Commission's advice tended to be received by government and the wider public as 'expert', trustworthy, and impartial, which helped legitimise the idea of relaxing LURs – distancing it from its association with right-wing, neoliberal ideology, and re-framing it as 'depoliticised knowledge' (Soaita et al., 2021). The Commission provided a conduit for economists outside of government to input advice: via formal submissions, commissioned analysis (see: Lees, 2015; Zheng, 2013), and informal counselling of the commissioners. The resulting reports were highly influential for central government policy-making. For instance, informing the Special Housing Areas policy, emboldening ministers to exert stronger pressure on Auckland Council regarding relaxing the urban growth boundary, and recommending the introduction of national direction on urban development (resulting in the NPS-UDC). And they provided a feedback mechanism of sorts, deriving learnings from each of the government's experiments to inform the next, thus contributing to both the evolution and circulation of the idea to relax LURs.

Importantly, these reports helped legitimise economists as 'experts' in debates about urban development that had been long dominated by planners. These debates came to a head in the final stages of the AUP development, which saw members of the urban economics community actively challenge – through public debate, submissions, and appearing as expert witnesses in hearings – the long-established norms of the planning community (which many interviewees perceived as catering to NIMBY-interests). A former Auckland Council employee described the AUP as a "*training ground*" for urban economists,

explaining that “you had people [...] asking, ‘what is this policy actually doing and what's the rationale for it?’ And you quickly realise [...] there was no cost benefit analysis, there was nothing.”

The perspectives of these economists held an unusual degree of credence in the AUP debates for two reasons. First, Auckland Council, unlike any other local authority, employed a chief economist. Established when the city amalgamated in 2010, the occupants of this role during the AUP development were outspoken advocates for the importance of land markets, and provided internal challenge to the prevailing ‘wisdoms’ of council planners. Second, an economist was included in the government-appointed Independent Hearings Panel advising the council. As one civil servant explained, typically the people appointed to these kinds of panels lack economic expertise, as this work is not particularly lucrative for “good”, “experienced” economists. However, this particular economist “took the role fairly seriously” and “steered quite a bit of the analysis”. Under his guidance, economic reasoning was at the core of the panel’s recommendations to reinstate much of the up-zoning that councillors had tried to remove.

The urban economics community were not the only actors advocating for the relaxation of LURs during the AUP debates. As one interviewee explained, the AUP was the “catalyst” for a wider urban activism movement. Several attributed the origin of this movement to an urbanism blog, ‘Greater Auckland’, started in 2008 by a group of (mainly) transport consultants as a public forum for commentary, ideation, and debate. This blog developed wide readership and became highly influential in urban policy circles (not just in Auckland), providing an important space for ‘knowledge production and circulation’, and acting as a site of ‘encounter, persuasion, and motivation’ (Temenos & McCann, 2013, p.346). Over the course of the AUP development, Greater Auckland highlighted the interdependency between urban intensification and public transport investment, advocating for the abolishment of minimum car parking requirements and the relaxation of LURs to enable growth ‘up’.

These two policy positions were picked up by ‘Generation Zero’, a youth-led climate action group. Through a series of predominantly social-media based campaigns – advocating for denser urban form to improve livability, reduce car dependency, and lower transport emissions – Generation Zero actively encouraged wider participation (particularly from young people) in the AUP development process, publicly confronting the predominant NIMBY-interests and raising the profile of LURs in the public eye. Their activities garnered significant public support and media attention, successfully influencing the debate in Auckland (Greive, 2016; Hunt, 2021; McArthur, 2017), and instigating a wider advocacy movement that quickly transcended Generation Zero and spread beyond Auckland – eventually growing into what various interviewees described as a popular “YIMBY movement”.

Over this period, social media – especially Twitter – provided another important space for ‘knowledge production and circulation’ and ‘encounter, persuasion, and motivation’ (Temenos & McCann, 2013, p.346), connecting the growing urban activism movement (both across New Zealand, and to its international counterparts) and providing a platform for idea-exchange. According to one journalist, Twitter has an “*outsized influence*” in New Zealand “*because all of the politicians and media are on there and get their thoughts warped by this small, and probably slightly weird, out-of-step conglomeration of people that are not really reflective of the wider population [...] it has this closeness to people in power*”. By his explanation, the urban activism movement “*understood that*”, using Twitter and other “*new media*” very effectively to steer the discourse, directly lobby politicians, influence civil servants, and grow the movement.

The early influence of Generation Zero shaped the urban activism movement in two important ways. First, their deliberately non-partisan approach (West & Garlick, 2023) continues to endure in the wider movement. One interviewee explained, this approach makes people feel like “*well, this is just good policy that’s just been held back by vested interests, rather than necessarily a left-right issue*”, making it easier for politicians on both sides to be open to the idea, and for mainstream media to cover the issue without being perceived as partisan. Second, Generation Zero’s predominant focus on emissions reductions during the AUP debates (rather than housing affordability per se) continues to be reflected in the wider movements’ tendency to prioritise ‘up’ (in fact, often actively opposing enabling development ‘out’, which they tend to frame as ‘unsustainable’ sprawl).

Over time, a strong ‘advocacy coalition’ (Sabatier, 1988) formed between this urban activism movement and the urban economics community, converging on the idea of the relaxing LURs ‘up’, and encompassing a myriad of rationales beyond the economic. But many economists found the common disregard for ‘out’ frustrating. This included Chris Parker, a ‘charismatic individual’ (Jacobs & Lees, 2013; Lerner & Laurie, 2010; Soaita et al., 2021) who had served as Auckland Councils’ chief economist during the final eighteen months of the AUP development process, during which he developed considerable influence over civil servants and central government politicians alike – often consulting in an informal capacity. Although supportive of significant up-zoning (see: Parker, 2015), through participation in the aforementioned email group, Parker had become convinced that ‘up’-zoning alone would not be sufficient to bring down land prices. Fed up with the council’s stubborn unwillingness to question the ‘compact city’ model, he left the council for a housing policy role at the Treasury shortly before the final AUP was adopted (Harris, 2016). Under a centre-right National-government, the Treasury offered a more sympathetic venue for Parker’s ideas. Thus, once inside central government, Parker was a staunch and persuasive advocate for ‘*competitive urban land markets*’: a phrase coined by Parker in a formative briefing (Treasury, 2016), now widely used by public servants and central

government politicians on both sides as shorthand for the economic rationale behind relaxing LURs ‘up’ and ‘out’.

The bi-partisan politics of up-zoning

The Labour Party was elected to government in late 2017 off the back of a campaign that centred the ongoing housing crisis as a key issue – their flagship policy, Kiwibuild, promised to build 100,000 homes over the next decade. With this new government came Phil Twyford, who was widely regarded among interviewees as the primary architect of the up-zoning policies that followed – another ‘charismatic individual’ with a central role.

First elected as an Auckland-based MP in 2008, Twyford had borne witness to the development of the AUP, serving first as the Labour spokesperson for Auckland issues before being appointed as housing spokesperson in 2013 – a role he held until Labour came to power in 2017. Twyford’s experiences in Auckland afforded him a systemic view of the housing crisis, and he set out to develop a comprehensive, holistic policy position for the Labour Party. He was swiftly persuaded of the need to relax LURs through engagement with the growing advocacy coalition – described by Twyford as “*a group of both economists and urban activists that overlapped a bit, that created a very fertile and supportive intellectual environment for this policy making*”. Several interviewees recalled interacting with Twyford during this formative period, and asserted that they had helped Twyford develop his ideas. Apparently, Twyford was an avid reader of Greater Auckland, and was ‘very online’: according to one activist, anything put on Twitter went “*straight to Phil Twyford*”. Twyford quickly came to believe that “*a market-oriented, economic analysis of the problem actually provided the best explanatory framework for the mess that we were in*” (interview, Twyford). After first meeting in 2014, Alain Bertaud became “*my touchstone, I suppose. Him and Ed Glaeser.*”

Twyford’s accessibility as a politician was not particularly unusual; New Zealand is a small country with low power distance. Indeed, all of the ‘outsiders’ I interviewed mentioned instances of direct contact with MPs and ministers – whether in-person meetings, phone calls, texts, emails, or (most often) direct messages on Twitter. One activist explained, “*I would actually have a stronger word than ‘accessible’ [...] in most cases they’ve come to us rather than us coming to them [...] I never struggle to talk to those guys.*” But Twyford was unusual in his willingness to consult widely. He was committed to understanding the “*nitty gritty*”, and was seemingly unbounded by the typical partisan constraints of a politician: “*he could see a problem, he wanted a solution. He didn’t care, really, about the ideology*” (interview, economist). Twyford was for instance a member of the aforementioned email group, and

several interviewees referred to an opinion article on LURs that Twyford co-authored with the director of a right-wing economics think tank⁶ (Twyford & Hartwich, 2015) as evidence of Twyford's remarkably collaborative approach.

Twyford, once convinced of the urgent need to relax LURs 'up' and 'out', worked to persuade the Labour caucus to his view:

"before I became the housing spokesperson, Labour's thinking about housing was, essentially, 'we gotta build more public housing'. And that developers and development are powerful and sometimes dangerous forces that need to be reined-in and controlled. And that the market is something that needs to be tamed rather than harnessed and unleashed."

He found strong support in fellow MP David Parker, the Labour spokesperson for the environment (the portfolio responsible for the administration of the primary planning legislation). Parker subscribed to similar views as Twyford, having been persuaded by Edward Glaeser in 2013: *"I went along to his lectures, read his book. [...] I could see that his analysis was, in my opinion, correct"* (interview, David Parker).

Upon Labour's election to government in 2017, Parker was appointed Minister for the Environment, and Twyford was appointed Minister for Housing, Urban Development, and Transport (a new portfolio combination borne of Twyford's commitment to a systemic approach). By this point, Twyford and Parker had formed a strong partnership and developed a clear vision, supported by the new Associate Transport Minister, Green Party MP Julie-Anne Genter – a trained planner with a background in economics, a long-time advocate for abolishing minimum car parking requirements, and the partner of a prominent urban economist.

Twyford and Parker both held long-term aspirations for system reform to reduce homeowner-dominance in planning processes, and provide local authorities with better incentives to enable growth – for instance, through reforms to the primary planning legislation and provision of new infrastructure funding and financing tools. But given the escalating urgency of the housing crisis, they wanted to take more immediate action on LURs first, by issuing a more directive National Policy Statement to supersede the existing NPS-UDC. Both had a strong appetite to override local government control over planning; they felt local authorities had been provided enough chances to address the issue independently, and that – as the Productivity Commission had made clear – central government was justified to intervene in what had become a national-scale crisis (for which central government was bearing the costs).

⁶ The same think tank that had arranged Bertaud's visit in 2014.

Several civil servants interviewed reported a widespread sense of enthusiasm and support for the ministers' agenda among civil servants, too – a number of whom were former employees of Auckland Council or had otherwise been involved in the AUP process. Something of a 'discourse coalition' (Hajer, 1993; Healey, 2013) had begun to form across the different government agencies, coalescing around Chris Parker's concept of '*competitive urban land markets*', whereby, increasingly, it was taken as a given that achieving housing affordability would require relaxing LURs 'up' and 'out' to 'flood the market' with developable land and bring down prices. However, this set the goal of housing affordability in conflict with environmental concerns pertaining to sprawl, which were heightened under this new, left-wing Labour-government – under a Prime Minister who had recently proclaimed climate change to be her generation's 'nuclear free moment' (Ewing, 2017). Thus, the ministers' decision to set housing affordability as the primary goal of their newly formed, interagency 'urban growth agenda' work programme, was highly controversial. Indeed, several civil servants interviewed made reference to the tensions this caused between the Ministry for the Environment (MFE) on one side, and the Ministry for Housing and Urban Development (MHUD) and the Treasury on the other. It was notable, however, that whenever these interviewees (particularly from MFE) expressed misgivings about the prioritisation of 'housing affordability', they always rushed to assure that they *did* believe in the necessity of 'out', which is indicative of the strength of the discourse coalition that had formed (at least by the time I conducted interviews) – these civil servants appeared anxious not to be perceived as in opposition to the discourse that had come to dominate the civil service.

Despite the widespread agreement on 'up' and 'out' between civil servants and the relevant ministers, Twyford and Parker decided to prioritise 'up' initially. Parker explained, "*we effectively did a deal*": Twyford wanted to abandon urban growth boundaries altogether, but Parker was not prepared to do this without first implementing measures to ensure that the costs of inefficient greenfield expansion would be internalised to the developers, "*because otherwise [...] you're enabling the urban sprawl and you're putting the cost to councils [and] central government*". Consequently, they directed the focus of the new policy statement to be 'quality intensification' – 'quality' being reflective of the failure of the AUP to direct new development into the right places (like the high socio-economic suburbs surrounding the city centre).

As work on the new policy statement progressed, Labour's flagship Kiwibuild homebuilding programme was well behind targets and becoming an embarrassment for the government (Cooke, 2019). Consequently, a Cabinet reshuffle in June 2019 saw Twyford replaced as Minister for Housing (Hickey, 2019), though retaining responsibility for the new policy statement under his urban development portfolio. Two months later, the draft NPS-UD – the first upzoning policy – was released for public consultation (MFE & MHUD, 2019a). According to several interviewees, this consultation 'flew under the radar'. In fact, none of the 'outsiders' interviewed recall being aware it was happening at the time.

One civil servant explained that the consultation was combined with two other National Policy Statements – ‘Highly Productive Land’ and ‘Fresh Water’ – which both proved controversial and overshadowed interest in the “*highly technical*” and “*boring*” NPS-UD. Despite agencies taking the consultation on a thirty-destination ‘roadshow’ over seven weeks, and meeting with officials from local authorities around the country, only 256 submissions were collected (MFE & MHUD, 2019b).

Perhaps surprisingly, civil servants reported that submissions were broadly supportive of the proposals (MFE & MHUD, 2019b). However, while many submitters considered ‘a prescriptive approach necessary to ensure that [local authorities] complied’, others raised concerns about ‘unduly limiting local autonomy’ (MFE & MHUD, 2019b, p.8). Consequently, in an attempt to balance these concerns, civil servants recommended that the policy statement include a mix of prescriptive and descriptive policies (MFE & MHUD, 2020). For example, local authorities would be required to zone for at least six-storeys within walkable catchments of urban centres and major public transport stops, but could define ‘walkable’ as they see fit, according to their local conditions. The idea being that central government would be the most prescriptive where they had the strongest evidence. And by this point, they had strong evidence to justify requiring local authorities to raise building height limits (in high-demand areas) and abolish minimum car parking requirements, in the form of a cost-benefit analysis (PwC, 2020). This analysis was conducted under the guidance of the former chief economist of Auckland Council, Geoff Cooper (by this point, a consultant) and drew heavily from the AUP experience. Many interviewees talked about the important role they felt the positive findings of this analysis played in persuading the remaining sceptics of relaxing LURs within the civil service and Cabinet – both environments in which ‘evidence-based policy is idealised’ (Temenos et al., 2019, p.109).

The final NPS-UD was published in July 2020, in the midst of the global covid-19 pandemic. There was no announcement, and no press release (Cooke, 2021). Many ‘outsiders’ interviewed speculated that this was an intentional move by the government, to avoid attention and controversy. However, one interviewee explained that the Minister for Housing’s communications staff had simply “*assumed that it was gonna be so boring that putting out a press release was kind of stupid, or it would just be looked over, or miss-understood*”, instead planning for “*a big, exclusive story [...] that weekend*”. Except that they got scooped before they had the chance, by a journalist who had seen someone posting about the new policy on Twitter and promptly sought comment from the opposition: the National Party housing spokesperson immediately denounced the NPS-UD (likely an instinctive reaction to new policy, as an opposition MP), only to be quickly overruled by the infrastructure spokesperson, Chris Bishop, who gave a statement in support (Cooke, 2020).

Bishop had recently found himself propelled into the upper ranks of the National Party, after a coup had thrown the party into turmoil and seen leadership change twice in two months. Bishop, a self-described “relatively young” “libertarian”, had a long-standing interest in housing policy, borne of concern for his “generation being locked out of the housing market”. He subscribed to the ‘competitive urban land markets’ rationale for relaxing LURs, having been influenced by the work of the Productivity Commission, and by Twyford (of all people!):

“When Phil Twyford became the housing spokesperson for Labour [...] some of the stuff he was saying- I remember thinking well, this is actually pretty on to it. This is actually pretty right wing, pretty free market. [...] I remember reading [a speech by Twyford (see: Twyford, 2019)] thinking, ‘I don’t disagree with a single thing he’s said here’ [...] it was like, the most right wing speech I’d ever seen a New Zealand politician give about land markets.”

Bishop recalls having seen his colleague dismiss the NPS-UD and thinking “that’s gonna make us look like we’re anti-housing when fundamentally, it’s actually quite a permissive, liberalising regime.” So, he acted quickly to overrule her: “I don’t understand why National would oppose it, so I supported it. It’s basically as simple as that. It’s a good policy.” Although Bishop did not consult his colleagues when he made this decision (as he was asked for immediate comment), he did have strong allies in fellow MP and “close friend”, Nicola Willis, and in the new Party leader, Judith Collins – who had already expressed support for relaxing LURs during the NPS-UD consultation (Maxwell, 2019).

At first, without the National Party attacking it, the NPS-UD largely avoided backlash. By David Parker’s recollection, the new up-zoning policy was in fact welcomed by some: “when you talk to mayors and councillors, quite a few of them actually want it [...] they don’t like NIMBYism themselves, but they’re hostage to it”. However, several other interviewees speculated the policy only avoided controversy because the public was distracted by the on-going pandemic, and because the policy was quite technical, not very tangible, and it did not take immediate effect – local authorities first had to implement it via scheduled Plan updates over the coming years, before the public would understand its implications.

Meanwhile Collins, an unpopular politician, was polling poorly. In the face of an upcoming general election, she was “looking for an issue to make her own” (interview, Bishop). As the housing crisis reached new heights, exacerbated by the pandemic, the advocacy coalition was raising the salience of relaxing LURs as a housing affordability intervention, particularly amongst young voters – a demographic Collins hoped to appeal to; according to Bishop, “Judith did, and still does, think housing is a huge issue generationally”. Inspired by the previous National-government’s success with the Christchurch rebuild, Collins pledged that, if elected, she would pass emergency legislation to require local authorities to immediately re-zone for ‘30 years of growth’ (Coughlan, 2020).

Despite Collins' efforts, Labour's strong pandemic response saw them re-elected in October 2020 in a landslide. But over the covid-crisis, house prices had skyrocketed (Leahy, 2020). Towards the end of 2020, 'housing' had become the biggest 'issue facing New Zealanders' (Dudding, 2020). Willis (now the National Party housing spokesperson) began pressuring the Labour-government to take stronger action on LURs, urging that the NPS-UD implementation deadline be brought forward.

Ministers began to feel that political conditions were favourable to take more radical action on LURs: the mounting housing crisis in combination with the covid-crisis had created a 'window of opportunity' (Soaita et al., 2021). Twyford (now further demoted to Associate Environment Minister), was inspired by efforts in California to abolish 'single family zoning' and suggested to Parker that New Zealand do the same. By this point, it was clear that the AUP was having positive effects on housing supply, and was shifting new development from low-density greenfield expansion to intensification within the existing suburbs. There was a sense that Aucklanders were becoming more accepting of density and that the AUP was increasingly viewed positively. So, Twyford proposed that the central government simply 'lift and shift' the medium density zone from the AUP and require it be applied as the baseline minimum zone across all major urban areas around the country. As David Parker explained: "*we were trying to use- as a precedent- something that had been done well*". Eventually, per civil service advice, ministers settled on a simpler, 'blunt' option: enabling up to three homes, of up to three storeys, on any residential land parcel in all major urban areas (the MDRS). Several civil servants interviewed commented that by this point the '*competitive urban land markets*' discourse had come to dominate within government agencies, and that ministers seemed increasingly willing to trade-off environmental concerns against housing affordability.

Ministers wanted to be seen to be responding swiftly to the public mood on housing. So, rather than updating the NPS-UD again, the decision was made to insert the MDRS directly into the primary planning legislation via an amendment act – a pathway made possible by the now Labour-majority in parliament. This pathway would avoid arduous consultation requirements. Instead, the new standards would pass through a parliamentary select committee, a process which could be truncated 'under urgency'. Alongside, ministers decided to accelerate the NPS-UD, by bringing forward the implementation deadline and requiring local authorities to use a 'streamlined planning process', which – inspired by the AUP process – would reduce consultation, curtail appeal rights, and appoint Independent Hearings Panels around the country. This time, the panels would be appointed by local authorities themselves, but the Minister for the Environment would hold final decision-making rights (should the local authority deviate from the advice of the panel).

Compared to the more targeted NPS-UD, the proposed MDRS would be a broad, sweeping up-zoning intervention – simple, tangible, and easily understood by the public; strong NIMBY-backlash was

expected. But Labour ministers knew they had allies in the National Party. Collins – who was continuing to promote her similarly drastic Christchurch-inspired emergency rezoning policy – had written to ministers before the 2020 election, offering to work together on reforms to the primary planning legislation, then again in January 2021, suggesting the parties work together on her emergency rezoning proposal, then *again* in April, when she then put forward her own member's Bill to that effect. So in June, after securing Cabinet support for the MDRS, Labour ministers wrote back and asked National to support their proposal (RNZ, 2021; Small, 2021).

According to Bishop, Collins saw supporting the MDRS as an opportunity for National to regain some credibility on the housing issue – that this was a tangible policy that would be well received by younger, urban voters, which she felt was worth the risk of upsetting older homeowners. Bishop explained:

“I think it's taken quite a bit of courage for us as a political party to make the leap. I have argued a lot [that] we cannot hope to win elections unless we appeal to people beyond the National Party base. [...] for us, that means city dwellers, urban progressives, younger people. And housing is the number one issue for those voters. [...] in the long term, people who own property tend to vote National [...] so sorting out housing is in the political interests of the National Party.”

He recalls some initial scepticism within the National Party caucus but *“in the end, Judith [Collins] was like, 'nah, we're doing it. It's the right thing to do. It's a good policy [...] and we'll get credit for it.”* Many National politicians, like their Labour counterparts, were fed up with NIMBYism and the inaction of local authorities. And this would not be the first time the parties collaborated on policy either, having recently passed the *'Zero Carbon Act'* together in 2019 (West & Garlick, 2023).

With National at the table, everything became *“really hush hush”*, with inter-Party negotiations *“top secret”* between senior leadership (interview, politician). Officials were directed to keep the policy work confidential and forbidden from consulting with local authorities, in effort to minimise the risk of leaks. One civil servant explained:

“there was a bit of a view [from ministers] that we want to blindside local government about it, because if we let local government know, then the public will know, and then [...] there will be a huge backlash to this bill even before it is introduced to Parliament [...] they knew local government would have been against it so, what's the point of informing local government if they're just going to whinge about it, and you have two or three months of a lot of complaining before you get a Bill through the house?”

Thus, when Labour and National held a joint-press conference to announce the MDRS in October 2021 (Coughlan, 2021), they were met with shock from local authorities. The Bill was then passed in just nine weeks. This was unusually fast, but as one activist observed, ‘urgent’ policy-making had been somewhat normalised by the on-going pandemic response. The pre-agreement between National and

Labour meant there was little appetite for making changes during select committee, despite many submissions made in opposition to the policy – especially as National MPs became distracted by another leadership dispute which saw Collins replaced as party leader mid-select committee.

Many interviewees discussed the ‘double-edged sword’ of the secrecy and speed with which the MDRS was introduced. On the one hand, there was a sense that the bi-partisan accord would not have survived more public pressure, or a longer process: *“there was a moment for that to happen, and that moment would have passed”* (interview, civil servant). Indeed, house prices (and the associated public pressure) peaked in late 2021, and have been falling since (Craymer, 2022). On the other hand, several lamented missed opportunities: often quick to assure that while they think the MDRS is ‘good’ policy, it could have been ‘better’. For instance, several regretted that a requirement for mixed-use zoning was not considered early enough to be included.

The introduction of the MDRS sparked a resurgence of NIMBY-backlash, leading numerous local authorities to resist its implementation – a situation which some interviewees felt could have been mitigated had local authorities not been ‘blind-sided’. The lack of consultation with local authorities fractured already strained relationships, especially with Auckland Council – where many of the younger staffers who had been most supportive of relaxing LURs under the AUP had since followed the momentum to central government or other local authorities, leaving behind older colleagues who were more receptive to NIMBYism. With Labour's staunchest advocate for relaxing LURs, Twyford, having been relegated to the backbenches (and replaced by a less enthusiastic minister), National politicians found themselves facing the brunt of the backlash. This backlash was then fueled by politicians from a minor party, ACT, which – despite being ostensibly libertarian – started cynically campaigning against the MDRS to win voters from National. Consequently, National (now without the leadership of Collins) withdrew support for the MDRS in May 2023 (McConnell, 2023; West & Garlick, 2023) – another scenario that may have been avoidable if minor parties had been included in the bi-partisan negotiations and given the opportunity to buy-in.

All is not lost, however. The National Party – now in government, following the late 2023 election – has pledged to make the MDRS optional (rather than removing it entirely), provided local authorities can demonstrate they have zoned for at least ‘30 years of growth’ (MacManus, 2024; Small, 2024). Although the details of this alternative policy are not yet clear, Bishop (now Minister for Housing) reflects: *“basically there is like, now cross party consensus- across central government anyway- that councils should be much more permissive about housing supply”*, so *“at least we're working away on the right policy areas.”*

Conclusions

So, what is it then about the New Zealand context that enabled the (somewhat) successful localisation of this globally mobile policy, ‘up-zoning’?

The most obvious factor is the unprecedented severity of the housing affordability crisis in New Zealand, which created political conditions conducive to drastic action. However, this crisis is not especially unique to New Zealand, as housing markets in many other countries are now reaching similar heights (Cox, 2023). But New Zealand was in a relatively unique position to take advantage of the ‘window of opportunity’ provided by this crisis (compounded by the covid-crisis). As I have demonstrated with this article, it took more than a decade to prepare fertile ground for New Zealand’s up-zoning policies. Over these years of experimentation, learning, idea circulation, and evolution, the idea of ‘relaxing LURs’ came to dominate the housing affordability policy discourse in New Zealand, with an advocacy coalition in favour of this idea forming between urban economists and activists outside of government (a ‘YIMBY movement’), and a discourse coalition coalescing around ‘competitive urban land markets’ within government. As I see it, there were two important factors that enabled this idea to dominate.

First, over time, the idea of ‘relaxing LURs’ was legitimised as ‘best practice’ and depoliticised through: the influence of international ‘experts’ (Glaeser and Bertaud) endorsing the idea; the rise and legitimisation of urban economists as ‘experts’ in planning debates; the ‘broad tent’ approach of the urban economics community, as exhibited by the activities of the email group I have profiled; the publications of the Productivity Commission, which leveraged the impartiality of the civil service; the somewhat surprising adoption of this market-oriented solution by climate-focused urban activists, and their active efforts to frame the idea as non-partisan; and the unusual willingness of Twyford (and David Parker) to consider solutions outside the typical boundaries of left-wing ideology.

Second, New Zealand is a small and intimate country with a high degree of informality and low power distance. In a society where everyone knows everyone – New Zealanders often claim there are only ‘two degrees of separation’ (Davidson, 2015) – ideas flow easily through ad hoc networks (aided by digital platforms) and movements can develop quickly. The boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ can be blurry, as individuals are often broadly connected to- and move readily between- different layers of government, private consultancies, advocacy/activism circuits, and politics. Such messiness and unmappable complexity is in the nature of policy mobilities (Borén & Young, 2021; Jacobs & Lees, 2013; Temenos & Baker, 2015). Indeed, per Thompson (2020), the knowledge circuits in New Zealand are entangled and interdependent. In such an environment, targeted activism can be very effective, and ‘charismatic individuals’ can play pivotal roles – the concerted efforts of a relatively

small number of people can rapidly shift the discourse and policy-making direction. As I have illustrated, the idea of ‘relaxing LURs’ was mobilised through both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms: New Zealand’s up-zoning policies were not just “*dreamed up and thrown down from on high*”, they were “*a response to a real social movement*” (interview, journalist).

Typically, dominant ‘discursive frames’ (like ‘relaxing LURs’ and its associates: ‘up and out’, and ‘competitive urban land markets’) in policy-making serve to marginalise alternative perspectives, limiting the range of problem definitions and solutions under consideration (Hajer, 1993; Temenos & McCann, 2012). Indeed, markets – and the law of supply and demand – have clearly become the default lens through which the government evaluates the efficacy of housing affordability policies in New Zealand. However, in my observation interviewees across both groups often appeared anxious to communicate that they did not view relaxing LURs as a ‘silver bullet’ solution, and understood the housing crisis to be a ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973). In fact, many seemed to (sub)consciously object to *my* focus on up-zoning and LURs as an interviewer, often actively broadening the scope of discussion to discuss other drivers – for instance, infrastructure deficits – and possible interventions (both supply-side and demand-side). Up-zoning is understood to be merely part of a suite of solutions.

Another critical element was the small-scale test-cases conducted in New Zealand in the years preceding the up-zoning policies. Within policy mobilities research, ‘scanning globally’ for policy ‘ideas from elsewhere’ has been understood to play an important role in the process of local persuasion (Cochrane & Ward, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2012), as international ‘best practice’ tends to be prized in environments where ‘evidence-based policy is idealised’ (Temenos et al., 2019, p.109). In this case, *local* experimentation provided critical components for the construction of New Zealand’s up-zoning policies (in addition to the globally-sourced components). Indeed, most of the policy actors I interviewed turned to discussing international influences only in response to my probing; the local test-cases – the Christchurch rebuild, the AUP, the Special Housing Areas, and the NPS-UDC – were highly salient. Clearly, the New Zealand-specific evidence derived from these test-cases was critical to making sceptics more comfortable with applying the idea of ‘relaxing LURs’ at the national scale via the recent up-zoning policies. Further, the lessons learned from these experiments were key to overcoming political reluctance to override local authorities. Thus, I suggest that cities could be conceptualised as important testing grounds, incubators, or ‘landing pads’ for globally mobile policy ideas, from which these ideas can then ‘springboard’ once more.

Finally, while one could argue that these two upzoning policies were perhaps a matter of time – the policy space had been moving in this direction for a while already – they were also very much a matter of *timing*. Twyford and Parker could not have anticipated the onset of the covid-crisis, which shielded

their flagship upzoning policy (the NPS-UD) from public scrutiny, easing the way for the more ambitious, broad MDRS that followed. Nor could they have reasonably expected National Party politicians to courageously rise above the incentives for oppositional politicking, to support the NPS-UD and collaborate in good faith on the MDRS; it was fortunate that Bishop found himself in a position of power at a critical decision making junction, and that Collins' brief tenure as National Party leader aligned with the short period during which these policies were introduced (her replacement is not enthusiastic about relaxing LURs). As this case illustrates, there is a degree of luck involved in the 'often serendipitous mechanisms' of policy mobilities (Jacobs & Lees, 2013, p.1577) that rely on the right people, being in the right place, at the right time.

Where to from here? With both Labour and National still committed to the general premise of relaxing LURs (the politics of the precise policy form, aside), a strong discourse coalition established amongst civil servants, and a still-growing advocacy coalition in vocal support of the idea in place outside of central government, it is reasonable to expect further innovations from New Zealand in this policy space: the NPS-UD and the MDRS represent the frontier, rather than a culmination. Future research could continue to trace the journey of this idea forward within New Zealand, but also *beyond* New Zealand: exploring how this localisation of up-zoning 'in turn feeds back into further [global] circulation' (Cochrane & Ward, 2012, p.7). It is clear from a brief search on Twitter that the AUP has already become a significant source of inspiration internationally. Interest in the NPS-UD and MDRS will only grow as these policies bed-in, and their efficacy is evaluated.

Within New Zealand, the mobilities of this idea at the *local* government level also warrant further attention. With this case study, I have focused on the perspectives of central government policy actors, amongst whom the idea of 'relaxing LURs' is now unquestionably dominant. However, the reflection of one civil servant is worth examining:

"It's weird to get recognition from overseas, but only have people in New Zealand basically berating you [...] we could never get an award for [the MDRS] from the New Zealand Planning Institute, even though it's literally groundbreaking. People just hate it."

Here, she refers to the public opposition to up-zoning at the local level – NIMBYism. Local authorities (and the policy actors within) continue to resist the implementation of 'relaxing LURs' – a situation central government actors attribute to miss-aligned incentives, rather than incompetence or ignorance per se. Nevertheless, while some cities have (predictably) stubbornly refused to implement central government's direction on up-zoning within the required timeframes (Brett Kelly, 2022; Gibson, 2023), the cities of Wellington and Lower Hutt have recently introduced their own up-zoning policies that are arguably even more ambitious than the NPS-UD and MDRS require (Politano, 2024). Which begs the question, why?

Perhaps it is simply that the process of localisation of this globally mobile policy is still in progress in New Zealand. As another civil servant reflected, “*there’s quite a cultural change that’s still required. [But] as we see cities densify, then I guess what’s normal and what the status quo is will change.*”

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